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ABSTRACT

This report on primary education in Iceland contains three sections which briefly describe: (1) aims, organization, and content; (2) changes in Icelandic schools in the last 10-15 years; and (3) educational trends and developments. Section I overviews preschool and elementary school programs through grade 6. Section II indicates changes accompanying the enactment of comprehensive education and problems facing Icelandic educators. Section III characterizes development of education in Iceland during the last decade as a period of almost unprecedented growth. (RH)

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Project No. 8:
"Innovation in primary education"

Primary education in Iceland

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Council for Cultural Co-operation

Strasbourg 1988

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Strasbourg, 16 May 1988 DECS/EGT (84) 91 rev.

COUNCIL FOR CULTURAL CO-OPERATION

Project No. 8 on

"Innovation in primary education"

PRIMARY EDUCATION IN ICELAND

Report submitted by
the Icelandic authorities

I. Aims, organization and content

1. Compulsory education in Iceland is stipulated by an Act of parliament no. 63/1974. All children have to attend school from the autumn of the year in which they reach the age of 7. The same act stipulates the following about pre-schools

> "Local councils may permit comprehensive schools to establish classes for 6 year old children, and 5-6 year old children, if the Ministry approves their plans, accommodation and equipment. Pre-schools are budgeted in the same way as comprehensive schools."
>
> "Comprehensive schools are permitted to allocate part of their premises to organise pre-school classes. Private pre-schools are not permitted without the consent of the district school supervisor concerned."

This Act of parliament defines the aims of schooling in this way:

> "In co-operation with the home, the school must prepare the children for life in a modern democratic society. The schools should therefore be guided in their work by tolerance, christian values and democratic co-operation. The school should endeavour to widen the children's horizon and develop their understanding of their environment, social conditions, the characteristics and history of Icelandic society and the obligations of the individual to society.
>
> The school must endeavour in its work to meet the demands and needs of the child and give each individual an opportunity to develop intellectually and physically.
>
> The school must enable the children to gain knowledge and develop their skills and methods of work, in a constant effort to gain mental and physical maturity. The school must therefore foster independent thought and co-operative attitudes."

In accordance with the objectives of the comprehensive school, work in all grades is to be closely related to the world outside the schoolwalls through observation and activities.

The Ministry of Education issues a general curriculum in which there is a more detailed exposition of the educational objectives of the school and the organization of its work. It is stated that special care should be taken to give all children equal opportunities as far as this is possible, while trying to meet and accept their differences in personality, maturity, ability and interest.

2. Most of the Icelandic primary schools are state schools and under the authority of the Ministry of Education. The country is divided into eight school regions. Each region is controlled by a board of education and the regional educational office, supervised by the director of education. The board of education and the regional educational office is responsible to the district authorities and the Ministry of Education.

The regionos are divided into districts. The number of schools within each district varies considerable. Individual schools are controlled by a school board. The headmaster/mistress in co-operation with the teachers council, appointed by the teachers, are responsible for the internal running of the school.

3. Children below the age of six have a choice of day-care institutions or play-schools; these are found mainly in urban areas; both whole day and half-day care are offered. These play-schools are run by the local authorities but receive some state support. Until recently there have hardly been any links between play-school and primary education, mainly because they are separate institutions and the educational qualifications for the staff are different. But there is now increasing interest in co-operation between these institutions.

However, there are considerable links between primary education and lower secondary as most pupils in Iceland continue at the same school. There is no break between primary and secondary education.

4. There are 217 comprehensive schools in the country with pupils from 6-16. The average number of pupils in each school is about 190. Of the 217 schools there are 70 with more than the average number of pupils, the biggest enrolling 1,280. This shows that there are a great number of small schools in the country districts. There are about 4,200 pupils in each year group and there are about 3,000 teachers working in the comprehensive schools.

5. According to the law the maximum number of pupils in a class is 30. In Reykjavik, the most populous district, there are about 24 children on average in each class of 7 - 12 year old children, 18 in each class of 6 year olds, whereas in rural districts there are often only a few children in each grade so vertical classes are common. In most urban areas pupils are divided into groups according to age, however there are some exceptions. One of these is an open plan school for the primary stage. Some comprehensive schools are carrying out experiments in vertical teaching for the first three or four grades (6 - 9 year old).

6. The school year is from 8-9 months depending on whether the school is in an urban or rural area, within the period from 1 September till the end of May. The school week is five days covering:

880 minutes in 1. grade,
960 minutes in 2. grade,
1,080 minutes in 3. grade,
1,280 minutes in 4. grade,
1,360 minutes in 5. grade,
1,400 minutes in 6. grade.

In most of the schools, two classes use the same classroom, one in the morning, the other in the afternoon. 97% of all 6 year old children attend primary school but the length of their school day/week/year varies from a minimum of 16 lessons a year to a maximum of 840 lessons (1 lesson = 40 min.), the average being 396 lessons.

7. By the law it is committed to the Ministry of Education and Culture to expand the provisions of the Law and General Curriculum and also to decide what study material is to be selected for the schools, its arrangement for the grades and the number of class hours for each subject. The study material and its arrangement for the grades appears in the curricula but the number of class hours for each subject is decided by regulations which the schools may however vary if circumstances make it necessary. Generally speaking the schools have considerable opportunity to organize their own time-table and to alter the weight of individual subjects in the first grades.

Icelandic, mathematics, social studies and arts and handicraft have been given the greatest weight as far as number of class hours is concerned. These subjects are taught throughout all the period of this school level.

In grades 1 - 6 these subjects are on the average allotted about 60% of the available time, the division being as follows:

Icelandic	25%
Mathematics	13%
Arts and Crafts	12%
Social Studies	10%
Other subjects	40%

The primary school curriculum includes Icelandic, mathematics, social studies (ie a

combination of environmental studies, Icelandic history, world history, geography and sociology), biology, physics, religious instructions, Danish, English, domestic science, art and craft, music and physical education.

In Iceland individual schools usually do not form their own policy or write their own curricula. Even those few schools that are markedly different from the rest owing to special methods or organization, e.g. open or half-open schools and experimental schools, have not issued a special, formal curriculum. Their policy, however, appears in their work, orgnization and methods but the contents do not markedly deviate from the core curricula.

8. **The regulation on evaluation no. 65/1985 states as its purpose:**

a. to supply pupils with information on their progress,
b. to encourage pupils,
c. to provide teachers and pupils with feed-back on various aspects of their work which could lead to improvement,
d. to inform teachers, parents/guardians about the progress of the children.

In the primary schools the children are usually given marks in a separate report book twice during the school-year. The report states how successful the child has been in reaching set objectives, and often a report is given on the child's progress, attendance etc. The children show this report to their parents or gurardians and the report may be discussed at interviews between partents and teachers.

9. The initial training for primary school teachers is three years at the Teachers' Training College. During these three years the students have 12 weeks of practical training in primary schools.

In-service training is mainly carried out during the summer. The Teachers Training college of Iceland is responsible for the summer courses. There are also several in-service courses or short workshops during the school year. The Teachers' College and the Department of Educational Development of the Ministry of Education and the Regional Educational Offices arrange these courses.

10. Children entering primary school have a medical inspection by a school doctor or nurse, and they are examined once a year after that. All children in comprehensive schools get free dental care from the first school year.

To meet the requirements of a regulation concerning consultancy - and psychiatric services in comprehensive schools dating from 8 January 1980, a separate department is to be established at each district educational authority entitled "Psychology Service for Schools".

Preventive work is emphasised and coherant service for children and their families.

The situation as far as remedial teaching is concerned varies a great deal according to educational districts. The most populous district of Reykjavik gives special assistance to about 20% of the children; in the lowest grades this especially applies to reading and mathematics. This assistance amounts to about 14% of the total teaching in Reykjavik. In the country as a whole the percentage amounts to 4-7%.

11. If the headmaster, the teachers' association or the parents wish to establish a parents' association in order to support the work at the school and strengthen the links between school and home then the head is obliged to call a meeting.

A representative from the parents' association has the right to attend staff meetings with freedom to speak and make proposals. In Iceland there are now parents or parents-teachers associations at 115 primary schools.

II. Changes.

There have been considerable changes in the Icelandic schools the last 10 to 15 years. In 1966, the Department of Educational Research at the Ministry of Education was established and its main task was the revision of materials and teaching of individual subjects in primary and lower secondary schools.

A new legislation for the Icelandic comprehensive education was enacted in 1974 and in 1976 the Ministry issued a general curriculum. It included the pedagogical policies, ie the role of the school, teaching methods and evaluation. The new curricula and the new teaching materials call upon different and varied teaching methods and activities in a lively and stimulating learning environment.

During the last years changes have been most obvious in the first grades (6 - 9 year olds) whereas the upper primary classes (10-12 year olds) have been more conservative.

There are though some trends now towards a more open education with emphasis on the child's individual development and that every child should receive tasks suitable for his/her ability. But there are many problems to deal with, both financial and professional, such as:

- lack of educated teachers, mainly in the rural areas,
- frequent changes of teachers again in the rural areas,
- lack of sufficient in-service training,
- the short school day for the first grades which results in a lack of creative work at this level,
- lack of sufficient teaching materials, including equipment, books libraries, aids etc,
- the school buildings in many areas are not suitable for the kind of education we would like for children today, there are not sufficient classrooms or they are often too small, there is a lack of special rooms for arts and crafts, music, physics etc,
- most classrooms have to be used by two classes on a shift basis.

In November 1979 the Ministry of Education appointed a commission to investigate the problems facing pre-schools(1). The commission was to make policy proposals and recommend what steps should be taken in the near future. The commission found that they were unable to separate the pre-schools completely from the first grades of the comprehensive schools and in their work they looked upon the pre-school as "school commencement" or part of the continuous education of 6-8 year old children. Consideration was given to the position of the youngest school children particularly because of the ever-increasing rate at which both parents go out to work.

The commission delivered a report in December 1981 (Skýrsla Forskólanefndar, menntamálaráðuneytið, desember 1981).

(1) Pre-school means 6 year olds in this report.

The report contains the following:

I. The development of pre-schools in Iceland.
Origin-preparation-motivation. A survey of the pre-schools 1970-80.

II. The pre-schools today.
A diagnosis of the present status of the pre-school; its external and internal organisation, methods, content, co-operation with parents and others, etc. Particular emphasis is laid upon the problems facing the pre-schools today with regard to educational and social considerations.

III. Policy premises.
- social
- attitude to knowledge and education
- equal opportunities (urban-rural)
- psychological premises
  a. intellectual development of 5 - 8 year old children,
  b. children with special needs.
- the status of the pre-school and its ties with the comprehensive school.

IV. Ways and means.

1. Objectives (6 - 8 year olds).

2. Organization; eg the link between pre-schools and comprehensive schools.
   - hours per day, size of classes
   - environment
   - methods and scope of study.

The main emphasis is on organising the school in such a way that each individual benefits from his work there, that the children are active and find enjoyment in their activities, that the environment is stimulating, and that the children's education is continuous and directed at the intellectual and physical level of each child.

3. Co-operation of the pre-school with various parties such as:
   - parents, nurseries,
   - psychology service, medi-care and other institutions,
   - special emphasis is placed upon co-operation with parents/guardians.

V. A plan of action for the next few years.
The proposals include eg:
- comprehensive approach to infant education
- increased number of lessons for the 6 year old to approximate those given to 7-8 year old children
- to strengthen the link between nurseries and schools.

Teaching qualifications were also dealt with. Proposals were made for the continued work, both concerning the teachers' education and the curriculum and teaching materials for the first three year (6 - 8).

III. Trends/Developments

The development of education in Iceland during the last 10-15 years has been a period of almost unprecedented growth. The organization of the primary school and the content of education

have been radically changed in a relatively short time. There are more doubts about teaching methods, and there are various instances where original expectations concerning changes in school organization following new teaching materials have not been realized as quickly and definitely as hoped by many in the beginning.

In this connection it should be remembered that this involves the basic education of a whole nation which has been radically changed in a about a single decade. Although there is much left to be done, most of the main changes have come through. The main lines laid down in the late 60's and early 70's have become clear. Of course, problems of secondary importance and unforeseen difficulties are constantly becoming apparent.

The General Curriculum is now under revision. Main emphasis is on clearly stated aims and objectives which include directives on content. The methods and organization of schoolwork are in the hand of Headmasters and teachers. Draft of the General Curriculum is now being examined by an Editorial Board appointed by the Minister of Education.

The new proposals for core curricula on the other hand not just open up the possibilities for individual schools to form their own policy and plans, but in fact demands it within a given framework. The reasons for this change in policy is based on the belief that the centralisation of the education system should be loosened up to a point and also the belief that more freedom and responsibility of the school is likely to bring about positive reforms in schoolwork.

Formally it is the concern of the Ministry to supervise the schools and ensure that they perform their task according to law and regulations. There is actually very little supervision of the inner workings of the schools. The regional educational directors and the directors of studies in the Ministry of Education are those mainly concerned with professional and methodological supervision; up to the present they have, however, regarded themselves more as guides, assistants and co-operators with the teachers rather than as supervisors or judges.

Formal supervision appears in the form of the results in centralized examinations and exploratory survey tests. Centralized examinations are, however, only held in four subjects by the end of the primary comprehensive school while exploratory survey tests are few and without general organization.

The Teachers' Union has recently issued an Educational Policy. Clauses concerning schoolwork are not in any major matters conflicting the official policy of the Ministry. Emphasis is on school based innovations.

A proposal for new laws for teacher education is now being considered by the Government. The proposal includes changes in the structure and organization of teacher training, four years of training instead of three and more emphasis on in-service training and further education opportunities for teachers and Heads.

At the invitation of Icelandic Authorities a group of experts from OECD visited Iceland in 1986. The Examiners' report on Education policy in Iceland was discussed on the 36th meeting of OECD's Education Committee in June 1986. The report has been published in Icelandic and distributed to all schools. Series of conferences based on this report are being planned. As far as compulsory education is concerned, questions were raised about facilities, content and teaching which are now being discussed in search for improvements.